

People of the Week®

The Man Behind The Move to Hike Gasoline Taxes

Transportation Secretary Drew Lewis's success in pushing the controversial plan may put him in line for bigger things on the Reagan team.

As President Reagan's point man in the drive to raise federal gasoline taxes a nickel a gallon to finance repair of the nation's crumbling roads and bridges, Secretary of Transportation Drew Lewis is being hailed as a prophet.

Yet it took almost one year of dogged lobbying by Lewis to persuade the White House and leaders of Congress that it was a good trade-off to raise taxes by 5.5 billion dollars in the depths of a recession in return for creating badly needed construction jobs.

The opposition was formidable—headed by the President himself, who saw it as an unwanted tax boost while personal income taxes were being cut.

Time of decision. The Secretary decided on the need for a gasoline-tax increase soon after taking over at the Transportation Department in 1981.

On examining reports about the rapidly deteriorating state of transportation arteries and the leveling off of highway-use revenues—which pay for maintenance and new construction—Lewis told aides that the only way to reverse the trend was to increase fuel taxes that had been untouched for 23 years.

It was not until unemployment topped 10 percent and the November 2 election returns signaled that jobs were uppermost in the minds of voters that Lewis's gas-tax increase was embraced by the President and by a host of Republicans and Democrats returning for the lame-duck session of Congress. The effort to renovate roads and bridges, along with work to rehabilitate or start up urban mass-transit systems, is expected to provide some 320,000 jobs.

An associate says of Lewis, 51, a successful Philadelphia business executive and political operative before joining the Reagan team: "He was prepared to be shot down at first, but he stirred up a lot of thought about a serious problem and he kept after it."

Getting on top of complex problems quickly is a Lewis trademark and has made him one of the most respected figures in the cabinet, despite the fact that he heads an agency rarely in the thick of the action.

He first drew national attention in the summer of 1981, when members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization ignored a no-strike oath and walked off their jobs. Lewis led the administration's tough response against government employees who, he said, "have not kept faith with the people."

Lewis ordered the air system to continue operating with supervisors and a minority of controllers who kept working. The strikers eventually were fired, and Lewis vigorously opposed any blanket reinstatement even after the union was finally put out of business.

The PATCO controversy earned

CHICK HARRITY—USMWR



Lewis, left, with Senators Dole and Long before testifying on boost in gas tax.

Lewis some enemies in organized labor, but his star rose with Reagan. One presidential assistant notes: "His political instincts help him. He doesn't panic or move in a new direction if things get rocky."

In an administration that has been short on political savvy, Lewis's skills have extended his influence beyond his department. Members of Congress of both parties have found him accessible and knowledgeable.

Whenever any cabinet shake-up is rumored, Lewis's name usually tops the list of those believed heading for a higher post—among them director of the Office of Management and Budget, Secretary of Labor, White House chief of staff or special trade representative. Insiders are betting that the President will move him to a more challenging job soon.

It was politics that first brought Lewis to Reagan's attention in 1976—but on opposing sides.

Reagan was challenging President Gerald Ford for the Republican presidential nomination and selected Senator Richard Schweiker of Pennsylvania as his running mate in a late campaign gamble to shake loose Ford delegates in the Northeast. But with Lewis heading the resistance movement for Ford, Reagan won few defections and Ford was nominated.

Early enlistment. In the 1980 campaign, however, Lewis signed on early with Reagan in Pennsylvania. He helped influence the selection of George Bush as Reagan's running mate and then served as chief liaison between the GOP National Committee and the Reagan-Bush campaign organization.

In all these maneuverings, Lewis has been able to walk a delicate political line by maintaining strong allies among both Republican moderates and conservatives.

While some critics in the party see him as an opportunist, they are few. Helping Lewis win friends in both GOP camps: He has appeared at some 250 Republican fund-raisers since taking office.

Lewis is a former Pennsylvania Republican chairman, and he made an unsuccessful run for governor in 1974. Some think that he would like another stab at running for governor, or perhaps the Senate.

His wife Marilyn is a seasoned politician in her own right, having served two terms in the Pennsylvania Legislature before leaving office voluntarily this year.

A graduate of Haverford College and Harvard Business School, Lewis built a successful business career that eventually led to the formation of his own management-consulting firm. His specialty was turning ailing companies into moneymakers. In his latest financial-disclosure statement, Lewis listed total assets of between 1.8 million and 3.4 million dollars.

Rural haven. For relaxation, the Lewises like to escape whenever possible from the Washington, D.C., scene to their farm near Philadelphia, where they raise fowl and livestock. They have three grown children.

One thing on which all agree is that Lewis is a highly competitive man. With his gas-tax crusade apparently assured of victory in Congress, friends now expect him to be looking for new fields to conquer. □

By JOHN W. MASHEK